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FEET FIRST!

Asian sport of sepak takraw gets legs up all over the GTA

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IN THE COMMUNITY



PHOTOS BY ERIN RILEY



Somewhere in the world, someone is playing sepak takraw.

It's not a video game. It's not an instrument.

It's a game. In fact, it's a really fun game that's wildly popular throughout Southeast Asia and is steadily spreading worldwide.

"It came to Toronto in around 1979," Bounzay Sihaphom explained, "that was when the Laotian immigrants started coming a lot to this area and they brought it with them."

Sitting on the sidelines, smoking a cigarette, Sihaphom is obviously proud of what Canadian takraw has become.

"Wherever there are people from Laos, Vietnam, China, Myanmar, all through that region, wherever they go they take it with them. Soon it will be an Olympic sport."

"[Takraw is] how most Laotians passed the time when they were in Vietnamese refugee camps, because all you need is a field and a small wicker ball. When they got to Canada, they just kept it up," Rick Engel, president of the Sepak Takraw Association of Canada, said. "By now there's maybe 250 club players

throughout Canada. Most players don't want to be organized in clubs. They don't want to play in tournaments, they would rather just play for a beer, keeping it as a strictly social thing."

Takraw has the magic peculiar to the most popular sports: It's basic and it involves a lot of showing off. It's also easily modified to suit the area, the available tools and the preferences (and sometimes just the mood) of the players.

There are at least as many variants of takraw as there are countries in Southeast Asia. Takraw seems to be the nickname for anything anyone decides to do with a small wicker ball. There's net takraw, hoop takraw, modified hoop takraw, and line takraw, among others.

One alternate takraw game scores players strictly on their acrobatic ability and desire to show off. Whoever can kick the ball the most impressively wins the game. A perennial favourite for that one involves making a loop with your arms behind your back and kicking the ball by bringing your legs through the loop.

"It's a very acrobatic game. It's not about strength, it's about co-ordination, jumping and flexibility," Sihaphom said. "If you like volleyball or soccer, you'll love this game."

Both Sihaphom and Engel are hoping for a broader audience than just volleyball or soccer players. They're involved in bringing as much of the GTA to takraw as possible. On a national level, Engel has gotten takraw onto the phys-ed curriculum of hundreds of schools. Sihaphom has been important as the STAC representative for

Toronto, arranging demonstrations at schools and community centers. "Any age can play. We like to get kids involved young, so they can really develop their skills, but it's a wonderful game for any age," Sihaphom said.

At one of the daily practices held behind the Gosford St. school near Jane and Finch, the players range from five years old to 45 or so.

"See him over there," Sihaphom said, gesturing to an eight-year-old goofing around with a friend, "he can bounce the ball more than 40 times in a row. The kids are so good at this." The grown ups are a little more focused, batting the ball back and forth with elbows, knees, feet and heads, groaning whenever a point is lost. When winter hits, the practice sessions will go on, migrating into the school gym.

"We were working on getting a grant so we could afford to rent the gym in the evenings over the winter," Sihaphom said. "We're always trying to get grants to bring takraw out into the community. But the school told us it was okay, they let us use the school for free."

Takraw hasn't swept the nation quite yet, but the game is catching on. There's a tournament almost every weekend, with cash prizes as an incentive for teams to organize. The 2004 Festival of Traditional Games in Montreal will host the next Canadian national championships. And slowly, school by school, converts are being won to sepak takraw. After all, it's hard to resist a game where you get points for showing off.

A REAL GAME SHOW

Sepak takraw is all about athleticism and style

BY AILEEN CORR

HOW TO PLAY ...

- SEPAK TAKRAW IS VERY MUCH LIKE VOLLEYBALL, BUT IT'S AGAINST THE RULES TO USE YOUR HANDS.
- IT'S PLAYED ON A COURT THE SAME SIZE AS A BADMINTON COURT (20 FEET BY 44 FEET), BISECTED BY A FIVE FOOT HIGH NET.
- THERE ARE THREE PLAYERS ON EITHER TEAM.
- THE BALL IS PUT INTO PLAY WITH A SERVE MANAGED BY ONE PLAYER TOSsing THE BALL AND A TEAMMATE KICKING IT OVER THE NET.
- POINTS ARE SCORED WHEN THE BALL EITHER DOESN'T CLEAR THE NET, OR BOUNCES OUT OF BOUNDS.
- EACH PLAYER CAN HIT THE BALL UP TO THREE TIMES BEFORE PASSING IT TO A TEAMMATE OR OVER THE NET.
- YOU CAN HIT THE BALL WITH ANY BODY PART OTHER THAN YOUR HANDS (HEAD SPIKES ARE PARTICULARLY COMMON).
- THE GAME IS PLAYED IN THREE SETS, THE FIRST TWO TO 15, THE LAST TO 21.